

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE A NEGATIVE
AMERICAN IMAGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

by

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 18 MAR 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A Strategy to Improve a Negative American Image in the Middle East				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) James Dickinson				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See attached.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 29	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

ABSTRACT

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TITLE: A Strategy To Improve A Negative American Image In The Middle East

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 18 March 2005 PAGES: 29 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The image today of the United States of America in the Middle East is extremely negative. It is based upon Arab perceptions of an inconsistent and biased United States Middle East foreign policy. This image is further exacerbated by the Arabic language media. Unfortunately, America's image has dramatically worsened in the last four years. In April 2003, *Business Week* stated, "Hatred of American policies in the Arab world has never been higher." A negative image of the United States in the Middle East was also shared by United States allies in Europe. Lee Walczak of *Business Week* continued, "In every Western European country, polls show that George W. Bush is seen as a greater threat to world peace than Saddam." Ironically, the President of the United States of America was perceived to be a greater threat than a ruthless dictator who oppressed his own people. The Gallup polls showed by a 2-to-1 margin in February 2003 that people in nine Islamic countries have an unfavorable image of the United States. These feelings amongst Arab countries are stronger today as the war in Iraq continues and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved. The United States must engage in a more skillful public relations campaign now. This paper will examine the Israeli and Palestinian conflict and the impact of Arab satellite television on American foreign policy as two reasons for the country's negative image and offer a strategy to improve our image in the Middle East.

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A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE A NEGATIVE AMERICAN IMAGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The image today of the United States of America in the Middle East is extremely negative. It is based upon Arab perceptions of an inconsistent and biased United States Middle East foreign policy.¹ The Arab news media has further exacerbated negative views about United States foreign policy throughout the region. Unfortunately, America's image has dramatically worsened in the last four years. In April of 2003, *Business Week* stated, "Hatred of American policies in the Arab world has never been higher."² A negative image of the United States in the Middle East was mirrored by United States allies in Europe. Lee Walczak of *Business Week* continued, "In every Western European country, polls show that George W. Bush is seen as a greater threat to world peace than Saddam."³ It was ironic that the President of the United States was perceived to be a greater threat than a ruthless dictator who murdered and oppressed his own people. Gallup polls showed in February 2003 that people in nine Islamic countries have an unfavorable image of the United States by a 2-to-1 ratio.⁴ These feelings have increased in Arab countries today as the war in Iraq continues and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved.⁵

The United States has helped Muslims around the world and continues to do so today in Iraq and Indonesia. These efforts highlight the compassion America has for people around the world. The United States cannot trust someone else to tell this story. The United States must humbly remind the world who is responsible for many of these unheralded humanitarian deeds and the billions of dollars of economic aid spread amongst countries throughout the world.⁶ The United States must now engage in a bold public relations campaign to tell this story. This paper will explore two significant reasons for America's poor image; the Israeli and Palestinian conflict and the effect of Arab satellite television on American foreign policy, and offer a strategy to improve our image in the Middle East.

REASON FOR THE NEGATIVE IMAGE: FOREIGN POLICY OR AMERICAN VALUES?

It is important to understand whether this negative image is caused by a resentment of American values, United States foreign policy, or poor communications. Many Americans perceive that this resentment is directed toward our values, culture and lifestyle. Interestingly, most Arabs do not resent America's freedom and wealth. They respect American culture, enjoy American television and movies and many foster aspirations of living in America.⁷ Most Arabs appreciate many aspects of American culture and values. A Zogby international survey of ten nations showed that a majority of people in five Arab countries had a favorable view of America's freedom and democracy. This Arab majority also looked favorably upon American

products and education.⁸ However in this same poll, most people expressed a negative view of American foreign policy. Only a third of the Arab and Muslims polled supported the global war on terrorism and almost ninety percent viewed American policy in the Middle East unfavorably.⁹ In March 2002, a survey found that eighty-six percent of Saudis surveyed said their frustration with the United States was due to its foreign policy.¹⁰ The resentment that most Arabs have toward America has nothing to do with American values; rather it is with American foreign policy.

A large number of Europeans have also criticized American foreign policy. They believe that George W. Bush makes decisions based entirely upon American interests without regard for the interests of others. They held this perception even before September 11, 2001.¹¹ In April 2002, majorities in four European countries still felt that America does not consider allied interests in the global war on terrorism.¹² The common perception amongst Europeans, many citizens of Great Britain, and the Middle East is that American foreign policy is unilateral. Further, they believe the actions taken by the United States in the war on terror and war in Iraq solely serve American interests.¹³ This objection to unilateralism is shared with a large majority of Americans. They protest that American foreign policy is heavily weighted in favor of American interests and does not fully account for those of other countries.¹⁴ This resentment held by the majority of the Arabs and Europeans toward American foreign policy is the cause for this negative image, not American values. In order to shape a more positive image, it is important to explore which foreign policy issues cause this resentment.

UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

There are several controversial foreign policy issues today that contribute toward the negative image of the United States in the Middle East. But no issue resonates more with people in the region and around the world than the Palestinian conflict. In 2002, a poll conducted by Zogby International surveyed people in ten countries; five Arab, three Muslim, Venezuela and France. The results of this survey showed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the most important issue for roughly two-thirds of those polled in both the Arab and Muslim countries.¹⁵ This survey was conducted after the war in Afghanistan and before the war in Iraq. Although according to academic scholar Shibley Telhami in 2004, "likely as it is to continue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain the biggest obstacle to an effective American policy in the Middle East." Even after the war and with the continued stability operations in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains at least in the Middle East and amongst many Muslims to be the most important foreign policy issue.

US INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The national interests of the United States in the Middle East are to defeat terrorism, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan, access to oil, and the security of Israel.¹⁶ That is what the American government claims are its national interests. However, this is somewhat different from the perception of American interests in the Middle East. As the war in Iraq began in March 2003, a Pew survey conducted in Muslim countries found that most people believe that the primary United States interests were to secure access to oil and to assist the Israelis in the continuing conflict, not the Palestinians.¹⁷ Even after the Oslo Accords, Camp David talks and the millions of dollars in aid given to the Palestinians, they still believe that the United States favors the Israelis. Lenore Martin states, "The two oft-cited American interests in the region after the end of the Cold War are the security of oil supplies and the security of Israel."¹⁸ It is essential to recognize the importance the Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians grant to the security of Israel as a United States interest. Consequently, the actions of the Israelis appear tied to those of the United States.

THE "SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP"

The United States has shared a close relationship with Israel since the late 1940s. This relationship began as the United States and the Soviet Union sought allies in the Middle East at the beginning of the Cold War. The relationship continued to evolve even after the Cold War based on mutual interests. Today, the United States and Israel share common goals and interests for their citizens; democracy, an obligation to combat terrorism, and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.¹⁹ These common interests create a close relationship, however, it is the Israelis nuclear weapons program that make this relationship special.²⁰ Israel will remain as a strategic ally of the United States in a region that is unstable and where nuclear proliferation continues today. Consequently, America will continue to pay a heavy foreign policy price in the Middle East for this special relationship as the actions of the Israelis in their ongoing struggle with the Palestinians are attributed to the United States.

The Israeli military response to the horrific suicide bombings during Passover of 2002 demonstrates how the United States response or lack thereof to such actions can serve to undermine our moral position along with our image. The administration appealed to the Palestinians to stop this violence. The death of innocent Israelis by suicide bombings could not be morally justified. The terrorists asserted that suicide bombings were the only method available to them by which to bring attention to the years of Israeli occupation and Palestinian repression. In response, the Israelis moved into Palestinian cities on the West Bank and the

Jenin refugee camp resulting in Palestinian casualties and property destruction. Although the United States condemned the Israeli response, it did not impose any particular limitations on the Israelis to limit their response.²¹ As a result, the United States was viewed to favor the Israelis over the Palestinians in the spring of 2002. This lack of response only reinforced the Arab opinion of the special relationship.

Arab resentment of this relationship is significant and adversely affects United States policy throughout the Middle East. To soften this tension toward America, Lenore Martin suggests four options: 1) step down the Israeli relationship, 2) promote political reforms, 3) reduce United States dependency on Gulf oil, and 4) promote peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.²² With respect to these four options and given the political situation in the region today, the two most promising options are to promote political reform in the region and aggressively assist the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In regards to the two remaining options, it is not practical for the United States to step down our relationship with Israel. Although the United States has done this in previous administrations, the political risk of weakening the relationship with a strong and stable regional ally is not practical.²³ Reducing American oil dependency in the region is not likely in the near term and could cause market instability while potentially undermining policy efforts.²⁴ Political reforms, although growing slowly, are underway in the region in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia is holding municipal elections and numerous democratic reforms have been undertaken in Qatar. Granted these reforms are in their infancy, but nonetheless, they have the potential to encourage others in the region. With the new Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and the new U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, there is renewed optimism and momentum in promoting peace in the Middle East. The forward progress and ultimate resolution of this conflict will have the greatest impact on reducing Arab hostility toward the United States.²⁵

STAGNATION OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE PROCESS

While the United States was heavily engaged in the global war on terrorism and combat operations in Iraq, there was no forward progress made in the Middle East peace process.²⁶ It was not until April 2002, after the destruction of the Jenin refugee camp and the deaths of many Palestinians that the United States moved forward in peace process.²⁷ By the summer of 2002, the United States along with the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia developed the "road map for peace." However it was not until April 30, 2003, after major combat operations in Iraq, that the United States agreed to publish it.²⁸ Although preoccupied with operations in Iraq,

Afghanistan and in the global war on terror, the Arabs perceived that once again the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was not a priority for the United States.

Until the Bush administration makes the Israeli-Palestinian peace process a top diplomatic priority, the United States can expect little Arab support of any action in the Middle East, including Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁹ No countries' interests are served by allowing this conflict to continue. It only serves to encourage further bloodshed that results in the injury and death of innocent victims on both sides, and consumes economic resources for purposes that do not in any way help the Palestinian people.³⁰ An *al-Jazeera* reporter in the West Bank, Walid al-Omary said, "If the American administration wants Arab support they should change their policy on the Palestinian issue."³¹ In 2002, a survey conducted in France and Venezuela found that a majority of people in both countries would have a more favorable opinion of the United States if it was successful in settling the conflict.³² Another survey found that majorities in all Arab and Muslim states said they would have a more favorable view of the United States if it "were to apply pressure to assure the creation of a Palestinian state."³³ While the United States continues to move forward in Iraq and Afghanistan, the lack of forward movement in the peace process means more frustration, economic insecurity for the Palestinians, and physical and psychological insecurity for both Israelis and Palestinians.

With the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia as partners in the road map for peace, why does the world look to the United States? This answer is that no other country in the world is in a better position to influence the peace process than the United States. As the sole superpower, the United States has the economic, military and diplomatic power to influence both the Israelis and Arabs.³⁴ As described by Walid al-Omary,

If America changed its policy, Palestinians would forgive America. They know America holds the key. If the Americans tell the Israelis to withdraw from the West Bank, they will withdraw within a few days. In the last closure around Arafat, which was in September 2002, he was really in danger of his life. The Americans told the Israelis to leave the Arafat compound within two hours – the Israelis were out in twenty minutes.³⁵

This reporter understands Palestinians sentiments. Although "forgiving" America may be somewhat overstated, the resolution would certainly be a positive step toward improving the American image in the Middle East.

The solution to this conflict centers on the fundamental issue of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state. The right of the Jews to a homeland has been widely accepted by Americans but it has only been recently that Americans have recognized that Palestinians also have a right to their own homeland.³⁶ The real peace will depend on the willingness of both the Israelis and

Palestinians to establish this sovereign land. "Every administration from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush believed that trading land for peace offered the best opportunity for a lasting settlement."³⁷ In October 2001, President George W. Bush said, "I believe there ought to be a Palestinian state..... [that] recognizes the right of Israel to exist and will treat Israel with respect, and will be peaceful on her borders." This is the essence of the "Road Map" that was developed by the "quartet" in 2002. Ironically, these same thoughts were expressed by the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, on November 30, 1978, more than a quarter of a century ago.

The PLO will accept an independent Palestinian state consisting of the West Bank and Gaza, with a connecting corridor, and in that circumstance will renounce any and all violent means to enlarge the territory of that state. I would reserve the right of course to use non-violent, that is to say diplomatic and democratic means, to bring about the eventual unification of all of Palestine. We will give de facto recognition to the State of Israel. We would live at peace with all our neighbors.³⁸

He made this remarkable statement to Congressman Paul Findley from Illinois. Although his motives and actions were always highly controversial, Yasser Arafat died before he could live at peace with his neighbors.

The Palestinians elected Mahmoud Abbas in November 2004 as their new president. President Abbas ran on a platform of democratic reform, a negotiated settlement to the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians and an end to the violence. He has started the process for reforming the financial, economic, legal, and educational institutions in order to build a sovereign Palestinian state.³⁹ The United States support for these Palestinians reforms is critical to their success. President Bush recently announced an increase in aid of \$350 million this year to assist with these reforms. Within the next few months, \$40 million of this aid will be provided as a quick action program to energize job creation, infrastructure, and private sector development.⁴⁰ Palestinian sovereignty depends upon these reforms in order to provide a stabile and secure environment for peace.

With the newly elected Palestinian leader comes renewed optimism for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Mahmoud Abbas may finally bring peace to the Palestinians, but it will take time. The United States and Israelis must be patient. The new Palestinian leadership must prove it can control the radical groups in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to establish a secure and stable environment in which peace can take place. The Israeli leadership is willing and prepared to move forward, as long as, the violence is curtailed. The United States must leverage this opportunity by holding each party accountable to the terms agreed upon. The United States can not be perceived to favor either party as in 2002.⁴¹ Peace

to the Israelis and Palestinians will mean a better way of life, more stability in the region and a better image for the United States in the Middle East.

The United States may be at a turning point in foreign policy in the Middle East. Over the past several months some extraordinary democratic events have occurred in the Middle East. In January, Iraqis turned out in large numbers to vote in their country's first free election in a half-century. Saudi Arabia is holding municipal elections for the first time since the 1960s. President Hosni Mubarak said he will change the Egyptian constitution so that other candidates can challenge him this year in the elections. The assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri led to large demonstrations and the resignation of the pro-Syrian government in Lebanon. With strong support from Egypt, United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and others, Syria is facing demands to withdraw their forces to will allow the Lebanese the freedom to govern themselves. These are significant strides in democracy in a region where changes are normally slow. With this tide of change the United States should ride the wave of reform; use the momentum to achieve peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

THE INFLUENCE OF ARAB MEDIA ON UNITED STATES POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Arab opinion of United States policy in the Middle East is heavily influenced by the Arab media. Images and sounds of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are captured and delivered by Arab satellite news channels, radio and near simultaneously by news services to millions of Arabs and Muslims around the World. United States policy is defined and debated over these mediums as it unfolds; generally, with no response, discussion or rebuttal by the United States government.⁴² While cell phones and the Internet exist today in the Middle East, they are relatively new and access throughout the region is still limited. Satellite television, newspapers, magazines and radios have the greatest impact in the region because they reach the largest audience.⁴³ Therefore what is printed, shown and said in the Arab media about the United States is generally what the Arabs and Muslims perceive to be the truth, whether that is positive or negative.

The pervasive emergence of satellite television in the Middle East has increased access to information for both the literate and illiterate. Today, satellite television is able to communicate to a much larger audience than newspapers or magazines. In a region that has an aggregate illiteracy rate of 38.9 percent; satellite television provides information to all audiences.⁴⁴ While radio is still a source for information, since 1991 the emergence of satellite television has had a revolutionary effect in the Middle East.⁴⁵ Satellite television broadcasts images and commentary across international borders and serves to reunite communities and

people that are separated by war or exile.⁴⁶ When compared with satellite television, radio broadcasts are generally limited to urban areas and do not appeal to audiences as much as television.

Access to satellite television is affordable and growing. Even in a region with such diverse income levels, twenty-five percent of the homes in 1990 in Syria and Morocco had satellite television, thirty-three percent in Algeria and Lebanon and sixty-six percent in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷ In 2004, more than 70 million Arabs watch television on over 100 satellite channels everyday.⁴⁸ All that is required to watch these broadcasts is a \$100 satellite dish that can receive dozens of free access channels.⁴⁹ Even in the most remote and austere parts of the region, a satellite dish standing next to a Bedouin tent is not uncommon.

U.S. GOVERNMENT SPONSORED MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In response to increasing anti-Americanism, the United States government increased funding to sell America and United States policy in the Middle East. This funding was used to increase existing radio programming and to start a new radio and television station. Since September 11, the Voice of America has increased their programming in the region. In 2002, the Middle East radio network or Radio Sawa was established. The broadcast was received in six Arab countries with a music format designed to appeal to young Arabs. The feedback from the target audience shows that it has been successful. However some media analysts suggest, only the music is being positively received by the audience, not the political message sent by the U.S funded radio station.⁵⁰ An editorial in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly* said, "chances are [that] the Arab youth will split the strategy: take the U.S. sound and discard the U.S. agenda."⁵¹

Al-Hurra, a new satellite television station located in Springfield, Virginia began broadcasting to 22 Middle East countries in January 2004. The purpose of this television station was to provide the Arab audience, specifically in the Middle East, with an alternative source of news and information to al-Jazeera and other Arab news channels. The Middle East television network or Al-Hurra cost the United States government \$100 million and met with immediate criticism as with Radio Sawa.⁵² Rather than increase support for United States policy, al-Hurra sent the opposite message. Journalist Rami Khouri suggests that, "...its main impact will be to heighten Arab anger and irritation with U.S. policy in the Middle East because the gap between American values and American foreign policy will become even more obvious to newly enlightened Middle Easterners". And according to the *Washington Post*, "it has a chance of turning out to be one of this country's most ill-conceived and wasteful experiments in public

diplomacy.” The U.S. government's funding of *al-Hurra* undermined the credibility and objectivity from the Arab perspective. If they do not trust *al-Hurra*, then who do they trust or at least who do they watch? The answer is that al-Jazeera is the television station that most Arabs watch.⁵³

THE AL-JAZEERA PHENOMENON

Interestingly, a survey conducted by Professor Shibley Telhami in 2004 found that out of 3,300 respondents in six Arab countries not a single person picked Al-Hurra as their first choice in television. In fact, al-Jazeera was found to be their favorite news channel. Other media observers support these findings. They find that al-Jazeera is the most watched Arab satellite television station.⁵⁴ Philip Seib states that, “al-Jazeera has a credibility the Western media can not understand.”⁵⁵ Highly controversial and widely accepted as the source of Arab news, this satellite television station has revolutionized the Arab media with its uncensored format.

Although there are many other Arab satellite television channels that compete with similar format and style, al-Jazeera remains the most influential in the Middle East today with its fourteen news talk shows.⁵⁶ Many officials in the United States government recognize al-Jazeera as a powerful voice that appeals to a diverse and large audience.⁵⁷ According to al-Jazeera's manager of media relations, Jihad Ballout, “if I was a strategist in the Bush administration I would advise him strongly to communicate with the Arab world through the media that is best viewed in Arab opinion, and that is al-Jazeera.”⁵⁸ Admittedly, the United States has an image problem in the Arab world. The U.S. media focus, although it has changed since 9/11, is still predominately focused on the West. Almost daily on the Western news broadcasts political analysts, either former Ambassadors, diplomats or former State Department officials, provide information, analysis, and perspective on foreign policy. The Arabs do not watch Western television, they watch al-Jazeera.⁵⁹ So, their understanding and exposure, from a United States official, is limited to the interviews on the Arab satellite channels. During the period September through October 2004, only seven interviews were done with United States government officials on al-Jazeera and four on al-Arabiyya. These were interviews only, not debates. They were conducted in English with an Arabic translation.⁶⁰ As a critical pillar in U.S. public diplomacy strategy the U.S. must engage al-Jazeera in promoting foreign policy using not only interviews, but talk shows as well. In order to understand why al-Jazeera is so popular to so many Arabs, it is important to discuss its history, philosophy, programming as well as its controversy in reporting the news.

As an independent television station, al-Jazeera began broadcasting on November 1, 1996 from the small Persian Gulf country of Qatar. The Emir of Qatar's bold decision to create a new kind of television network was not the only revolutionary initiative undertaken in this conservative and relatively unknown Arab country. Emir Al Thani, who seized control of Qatar from his father, introduced democratic elections for a number of authorities, created a new constitution, and established an elected national body. With all of these democratic reforms it is not surprising that the first uncensored Arabic news channel was set-up in Qatar. In March 1998, the Emir abolished the Ministry of Information. As one observer noted, he "belongs to a new generation of Arab leaders more open to political and social ideas familiar in the West."⁶¹

In the 1990s, al-Jazeera was just one of many new satellite channels in the Middle East. However, what made al-Jazeera unique was its all Arab staff of journalists, administrators, producers, and technicians.⁶² It was free, from the Arab perspective, of any Western influence. The core of the al-Jazeera staff came from the BBC Arabic service. The BBC Arabic service was shut down by the Saudi Arabian Minister of Information in April 1996 after broadcasting a show that criticized the government's human rights record. This left Arab journalists, broadcasters, and administrators unemployed. Subsequently, al-Jazeera hired 120 Arabs from the BBC Arabic service which comprised the staff of the television station.⁶³

Al-Jazeera also capitalized on another European problem with content by gaining satellite access throughout the Middle East. Until 1997, al-Jazeera's broadcast reached a limited audience due to the type of satellite transmitter it was able to lease. In order to receive their broadcast, a viewer needed a two meter satellite dish or larger. Canal France International aired a hard core pornographic show to an estimated Arab audience of 33 million in July 1997. The Arab Satellite Corporation terminated Canal France's lease for the satellite transmitter and signed a lease with al-Jazeera. This allowed al-Jazeera access to a larger Arab audience through a much smaller and more affordable satellite dish.⁶⁴

With the myriad of other Arab satellite news channels, what separated al-Jazeera from the others was its extensive news coverage and political debate programs. Although al-Jazeera was not the first, the extent to which they have expanded these two features have made them the most watched in the Arab world.⁶⁵ For example, al-Jazeera's show *Opposite Direction* features al-Qasim as the host discussing controversial issues with guests in a free and uncensored dialogue.⁶⁶ The basic premise is that the truth on any subject can be found only if all possible perspectives are presented for debate. This program was revolutionary in the Middle East, because government-controlled television had offered only highly censored, one-

sided presentations of current events. It gave al-Jazeera great legitimacy with its mainly Arab audience.

The popularity of al-Jazeera continued to grow as an independent Arab network. Their coverage of the second Palestinian Intifada increased its credibility amongst the Arab audience. According to Mohammad El-Nawawy, "even if al-Jazeera's coverage of the Intifada is not utterly impartial and balanced, its relentless broadcasts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been a critical component to its success in the Arab world."⁶⁷ By September 11, 2001 according to Hugh Miles, al-Jazeera was delivering new Middle East policy initiatives for leaders from Libya to Israel.⁶⁸ These leaders recognize al-Jazeera's influence with its audience.

The free access to al-Jazeera and the free discussion of politics is seen as move toward democracy for the Arab audience.⁶⁹ Some Arab governments are not willing to allow for these political discussions on television. Consequently, al-Jazeera's criticism of sensitive political issues has caused some governments to shut down their foreign bureaus. Even the United States requested the Emir of Qatar to "tone down" al-Jazeera's broadcast of the Osama Bin Laden video tapes during the war in Afghanistan. These tapes allegedly held secret codes and messages for the terrorists. The issue was not about the hidden codes or messages, rather that broadcasting the tapes would empower Bin Laden by giving him too much airtime.⁷⁰ Even under extreme pressure from the U.S. government, al-Jazeera continued to broadcast these tapes.⁷¹

The U.S government was determined to keep Bin Laden from using the television media as part of his information campaign. From an Arab perspective, the United States was trying to censor al-Jazeera. This incident only served to hurt the United States and empower the Qatari news channel. Al-Jazeera had stood-up against America over one of the most valued freedoms in America.⁷² According to Hugh Miles, "the United States sent the wrong message to the Arab world; that freedom of expression is important for America, but not for the Arabs."⁷³ By simply engaging al-Jazeera and appearing on their broadcasts, as they had offered to the United States, an opportunity was missed to demonstrate to the Arab world how this freedom works in providing information, dialogue, and debate, about both sides of an issue. Instead, the United States looked hypocritical.

Al-Jazeera is often accused for biased reporting. During the Iraqi war, both the United States and Iraqi governments were unhappy with al-Jazeera. Each government at different times in the war accused the station of supporting their enemy. Whether this is true or not, al-Jazeera won the respect and admiration of journalists and audiences worldwide for their coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁷⁴ It is not uncommon for news organizations to receive

criticism for their reporting when one side feels it was not fairly represented on an issue. In this case both sides were unhappy at times while the news industry praised al-Jazeera's coverage. According to journalist Rami Kouri, "I think if you look at the totality of al-Jazeera's coverage you will see that their coverage is quite fair."⁷⁵ If a comparison of the airtime given to the Bin Laden tapes is made with respect to the airtime for the 2004 United States Presidential election by al-Jazeera, one finds that the Bin Laden tapes received five hours of airtime as compared to 500 hours for the Presidential elections.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, no United States government officials appeared on al-Jazeera to interpret, discuss or debate the presidential elections with the Arab audience.⁷⁷

A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE A NEGATIVE IMAGE

The United States must commit to an aggressive public relations campaign to positively shape our image in the Middle East. The war on terrorism is more than a military struggle it is a public relations battle and one that we are dangerously close to losing.⁷⁸ We must challenge the lies before they become facts in the eyes of the Arab world. The United States must begin to fight the war of ideas as aggressively as we have fought the terrorists throughout the world. The United States military will defeat this generation of terrorists and their ideals, but the war of ideas can influence those people of the next generation.⁷⁹ Given the relatively free and open access to multiple sources of information, satellite television, online newspapers and magazines, Internet chat rooms and email, the formulation of these ideas can be influenced through aggressive United States public diplomacy.

Policymakers are aware today of the critical need to speak out and engage the Arab media. They understand that the United States must clearly articulate and appeal to the moderate and tolerant societies in the Muslim world.⁸⁰ However we cannot appeal to these societies, if public diplomacy programs are under-funded. In 2003, the United States spent 1.2 billion dollars in advertising America to the world through the media. Surprisingly, this is less than half of the Ford Motor Company's individual annual advertising budget. Out of the 1.2 billion dollars, only 25 million dollars is spent on programs that directly target the Arab audience.⁸¹ This is simply not enough to support a public diplomacy campaign composed of educational programs, television and radio stations, Internet resources, and most importantly, the training of department spokespersons.

The negative image and resentment of United States is described by *New York Times* author Thomas Friedman as, "an iron curtain of misunderstanding separating America and the Arab-Muslim world."⁸² The administration must fund public diplomacy programs in order to open

this curtain. The public diplomacy programs in education have received a substantial amount of emphasis since September 11, 2001.⁸³ These programs provide for a long term strategy and commitment toward improving our image. A large amount of money has been spent on Radio Sawa and al-Hurra television. The United States should continue with these two programs given the investment. The long term strategy for these programs is a continuing effort to increase its Arab audience by separating itself from the United States government. The United States public diplomacy program must directly confront the Arab satellite networks through routine exchange, debate, and explanation in Arabic of United States foreign policy.

To engage in this campaign, more State Department spokespersons fluent in Arabic are needed. In February 2005, the Near East public diplomacy department had fewer than four spokespersons who were skilled enough to appear on interviews or debates on Arab television.⁸⁴ These individuals should be trained to a level where they are capable of debating issues on live Arabic television news programs. This training takes a long time and in the interim, the State Department can call upon the services of retired department officials who have served in the Middle East. A few of these officials are fluent in Arabic and should routinely take part in television interviews and debates.⁸⁵

In order to win this public image campaign, the U.S. must demonstrate to the Arab audience a consistent and meaningful commitment toward the issues most important to Arabs and Muslims. With more access to Arab audiences through satellite television, the United States can better articulate its accomplishments and concerns in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Bush's determination to spread democracy throughout the world can be explained, defined, and our policies in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran made clear. The Arabs need to see for themselves a sincere commitment by the United States to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁸⁶ The United States commitment must be seen on the news channels that are trusted by the Arab audience, not channels that are tied to the United States government.⁸⁷ With over 100 Arab satellite channels today, the public dialogue by the State Department on the peace process and other foreign policy should initially be on al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya.

CONCLUSION

The United States must improve its image in the Middle East. There is renewed optimism given the change in Palestinian leadership that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be resolved. The United States must aggressively facilitate this process. The United States must also engage in a public relations campaign in order to explain our foreign policy in the Middle East. The United States cannot rely upon someone else to explain, discuss, or debate our policies, or

to remind the world of its humanitarian deeds and the billions of dollars of economic aid spread amongst countries throughout the world.⁸⁸ Although the reasons for a negative American image are numerous and complex, this paper offered a double-edged strategy to improve this image by aggressively pushing for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians and to engage the Arab television media through a well funded public diplomacy program.

WORD COUNT= 6002

ENDNOTES

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⁴ Mark O. O'Keefe, "U.S. gives money to Muslim group to help image." *The Christian Century*, Chicago: Jun 5-Jun 12, 2002, Vol 119. Iss. 12: pg 17. [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 21 September 2004.

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⁶ Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 372.

⁷ Ibid., 371.

⁸ Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes: America in the Middle East, The Consequences of Power and the Choice for Peace* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 48.

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¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹¹ Ibid., 41.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

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¹⁸ Lenore G. Martin, *Assessing the Impact of U.S.-Israeli Relations on the Arab World* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 4.

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²⁶ Ibid., 1.

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³⁰ George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball, *The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 313.

³¹ Miles, 386.

³² Telhami, 128.

³³ Ibid., 99.

³⁴ Ibid., 126.

³⁵ Miles, 387.

³⁶ Ball, 231.

³⁷ Little, 305.

³⁸ Paul Findley, *They Dare To Speakout: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby*. (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1985), 13.

³⁹ Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas after Their Meeting," Press Briefing, Ramallah, 7 February 2005; available from <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/413934.htm>>; Internet; accessed 4 March 2005.

⁴⁰ "U.S.-EU Cooperation on the Middle East Peace Process," 17 February 2005; available from <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/42551.htm>>; Internet; accessed 4 March 2005.

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⁵⁰ Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network That Is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003), 213.

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⁷⁸ Gibson.

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⁸⁴ Martin, R. Quinn, Telephone interview regarding public diplomacy with Mr. Quinn, Office Director, International Information Programs (IIP), Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 9 February 2005.

⁸⁵ Miles, 385.

⁸⁶ El-Nawawy, 214.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Miles, 372.

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